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Steve Reich. *Pendulum Music*,  
1968. Performed at the Whitney  
Museum of American Art, May 27,  
1969, by Richard Serra, James  
Tenney, Steve Reich, Bruce  
Nauman, and Michael Snow.

# **“Sound Is Material”: Dan Graham in Conversation with Eric de Bruyn**

**Eric de Bruyn:** In your article “Subject Matter” (1969) you articulate a critique of minimal art by means of an analysis of the serial, musical structure of performances from the late sixties, like Steve Reich’s *Pendulum Music* and Bruce Nauman’s *Bouncing in a Corner*. What was the significance of serial music for artists at this moment?

**Dan Graham:** Steve Reich’s music wasn’t serial music.

**EdB:** No, but it had its roots in serial music.

**DG:** Serial music was about permutational rows, coming from Stockhausen, Webern, and then academically formalized by Pierre Boulez. I was interested in the middle sixties in the French New Novel, particularly in Michel Butor. And when I exhibited the work of Sol Lewitt [in 1965 at the John Daniels gallery], I discovered that he was also interested in serial music, and I discovered a magazine in Germany called *Die Reihe*, which was about serial music. So I think that serial music was Sol Lewitt’s way of dealing with what was minimal art; that is, permutational. I think my first use of music was in the “Homes for America” article (1966) showing the rows of houses and the ways they were arranged in terms of type plans, and also the fact that I gave musical names to each type of house: the sonata, the concerto, et cetera.

**EdB:** Did you invent those names?

**DG:** I found an example of their use during my two-day research for the essay. The article was concerned with the very beginning of minimal art before it had acquired a name, with creating a kind of factography that was also literature. Something like the French New Novel. It also went back to a kind of architectural criticism of the suburb being a new city, which was another play on minimal art. Minimal art abstracted certain things from the suburbs. They were trying to get away from Renaissance space. Instead of receding into a representational perspective, instead of flat space abstraction, they wanted to directly project geometrical units of Renaissance perspective outside, like in Don Judd’s or Sol

Lewitt's *reductio ad absurdum*. The article reduced the same thing to musical forms. I think this is because it was being done in the French New Novel and it was an interest of mine and Sol Lewitt's. Sol was applying musical composition to a very reductive, to a zero degree of composition. I think the other model coming from music in the early minimal period was John Cage's idea of silence. The materiality of silence. By the time I had become interested in Nauman and Reich, I wanted to do a critique of minimal art that was getting rid of composition. Minimal art was nonanthropomorphic; the artist's inner and bodily experience was totally eliminated, similar to John Cage. But in the work that was done in San Francisco in Anne Halprin's dance workshop, the performer's and the spectator's physiological response to both the acoustical qualities of the room and their inside brain time became very important. In San Francisco this was the time of La Monte Young, Terry Riley (who influenced Steve Reich), and dancers like Simone Forti and Bruce Nauman, all of whom were doing work in Anne Halprin's workshop. So there was a connection again of music to subject-oriented materiality; in other words, to the spectator's own responses in physiological terms, inside a physiologically activated space.

**EdB: Your critique of minimalism clearly developed along musical lines.**

DG: Yes, but I think that in American art the domains of music, dance, film, and pop culture were always linked to art. They were never suppressed. Pop art was always linked to pop music; it actually began in England.

**EdB: Your writings of the sixties, however, are not directly concerned with the relation of visual art to popular music. This theme will become more present in your later writings from the seventies.**

DG: The fact that I did not write about it does not mean that it was not informative. The first work I was doing for the magazine pages were totally influenced by listening to the Kinks and the Rolling Stones. "Mothers Little Helper" was the main influence on "Side Effect/Common Drug" (1966). So let's say that the music was always an influence. It just happened that I didn't write about it.

**EdB: The model of musical performance that you opposed to the practice of minimalism, is based on a set of structural principles that refigure to a degree in your later writings on popular music. I am referring to your discussion in "Subject Matter" of the direct address of the audience by the performer in the work of Reich and Nauman. The performer and audience**

Right: Dan Graham. *Homes for America*, 1966. Detail.

Opposite: Dan Graham. *Side Effect/Common Drug*, 1966.

**exist for one another rather than in a state of self-reflection. Also, you distinguish between the experience of time as a process, as “in-formation,” and an instrumental notion of time that is “metronomic” or “progressive.” Finally, you mention that the material structure of sound, unlike light, can be directly perceived by the human senses: “sound hits the ear as a continuous stream of particles and oscillations inseparably at one time.” In short, the performances of Reich and Nauman appear to flesh out two different modes of subjectivity, one in a state of pulsation and another in a static state of self-presence.**

DG: Yes, but I think that if you talk about Steve Reich and La Monte Young, self-presence is still there; the form is still material, but instead of being instantaneous it falls into two kinds of time: the brain time of the spectator and very long durations. Steve Reich took from Terry Riley the use of phasing a motif by repeating it with a six-or-seven-second time delay. So it interferes with the brain time and

creates a kind of psychedelic interior time, a feedback of your own perceptual processes merged with your current perception. It's an extended present time. La Monte Young is a long kind of tuning process, and it is slowed down. It's not directly instantaneous.

**EdB: But is there a pulse or wave-like structure to the music of La Monte Young?**

DG: It's very slowed down. In both cases the music appears to come not only from inside your own head, from your own perceptual process, but also, in particular in La Monte Young, the sound is bouncing off the side of the walls and the architecture as you move around. You are actually inside the production of sound by the architecture as well as by your own perceptual process. The sound is material. La Monte Young has the materiality that John Cage wanted to go for. It just adds time. I think the critique of minimalism through San Francisco music—it also came from Michael Snow—was based on the introduction of the spectator's perceptual process. But the materiality of that experience merged with the materiality of the surface of the artwork and the surface of the music experience. One was aware not only of one's own perceptual process but also that of the audience.

**EdB: This model of music, in its critique of minimalism, appears to offer a more immediate experience of time as a continuous present. An experience that cannot be obtained by visual means, since light, as you write in 1969, is always perceived "as a reflection of some other material."**

DG: There is a difference between lived experience and pop-mediated experience. It was also mirrored in the culture. At the beginning of the sixties there was a disposable pop culture, and towards the end of the sixties and early seventies there was a drugs-influenced, communal sense of experience. Music was more communal. I am also thinking about models of receivership by the audience.

**EdB: There is a definite communal aspect to pop music, but it's also a completely commodified form of experience. The performances of Reich and Nauman do not deal with this paradox.**

DG: Bruce Nauman and Steve Reich were art-world elitists. The next phase was for people in the art world to form their own rock groups. Some of them were influenced by acoustical music groups from San Francisco that came to New York, like Television and The Feelies. Or you have the popularization of Phil Glass, who moved into all media and did a very pop, easily accessible kind of music. Or, even more accessible, Laurie Anderson.

**EdB: In the essay “The End of Liberalism” (1981) you take issue with the Frankfurt School’s view that mass culture is inherently repressive.**

DG: I don’t agree with the Frankfurt School’s idea that mass culture equals mass exploitation. I think that there is an irony built into pop music as a result of the position that it is in, which is expressed, for example, in the song “Johnny B. Goode.” Good music like good art comments ironically on its own position while remaining popular and being part of the commercial structure. I have two interests in music: as a consumer and lover of pop music and as a rock critic, which was partly a hobby situation. My first interest was literary criticism, which was superseded by rock critics like Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, Sandy Perlman, and Patty Smith. I was very interested in the tradition of rock criticism, and also I was influenced in my art by structures I found in rock music. So in a way it was my passion. The other music of Steve Reich and La Monte Young was interesting because it was communal music from New York which had to do with the communal reception of work within the art world. Art and music came together in the 1970s with people forming groups, like Glenn Branca’s Theoretical Girls, who then moved from rock music into guitar-based classical new music.

**EdB: And the communal idea . . .**

DG: The communal idea was coming from the hippie period. It became very important with the emergence of small alternative spaces during the seventies in New York.

**EdB: In *Rock My Religion* (1982–1984) you situate the communal idea of rock music within a particular historical perspective. You refer, for instance, to the musical and religious fervor of the Shakers community in America during the later eighteenth century. As a result, the communal aspects of rock music seem to acquire a very ambivalent meaning.**

DG: *Rock My Religion* is basically about different epochs in America. The first people that went to America were peasants who [had] worked in the new industrial cities of Europe [and] been demeaned, their sense of family structure destroyed. Most of them were Protestants who were able through ecstatic means to place themselves in direct communal experience with God. They

Dan Graham. *Rock My Religion*,  
1982–1984. Video stills.



were the fringe element of Protestantism. They were very oppressed peasants who were forced to suffer incredible personal and spiritual losses in the city. So when they went to America, they set up utopian communities and experimented with different kinds of nonpatriarchal ways of living. The Shakers had the idea that there should be no sexual communion between men and women. The head of the community was a woman who was a descendant from God, and the principle was that reproduction caused an overpopulation of children which interfered with the status of men and women. Children either died at birth or doing menial, industrial work. The ideal was therefore a society based upon nonreproduction and communal craftwork. This is all terribly complicated. It was simply the anthropological basis for America. By the time of the first teenage culture in the fifties, the Protestant idea of the work ethic, which the Puritans had made the dominant idea of America, became reversed. It was the time of mass consumption. Machines enabled a liberation from the work ethic. Teenagers no longer needed to grow up; they could go into their twenties and still become consumers. Sexuality was not about reproduction but about delayed adolescence. And the hippie period continued that in a certain way. People were again going back to farms and the countryside trying out different communal forms of living.

**EdB: In *Rock My Religion* you indicate that the adolescent worship of the rock star is grounded upon a disavowal of phallic sexuality. The guitar functions as a phallic substitute, while communal life seeks to replace the Oedipal family structure. In April 1969 you write, Jimmy Morrison exposed the basis of the rock spectacle by showing his penis to the audience during a concert in Miami. Does this moment define the symbolic death of rock-as-religion?**

DG: No, I think that Jim Morrison became cynical. First he bought into stardom. He had power because he himself had become a phallic symbol. But then he revealed his own patheticness. He was drunk and exposed his actual penis in a limp state. He was killing himself off. It was more symbolic of the self-destructiveness of people in the late hippie period. The hippie destroyed himself and also the contradictions of the American male charismatic performer, which was based on the Hollywood idea of sexuality. He was symbolically killing off the hippie, stardom, and himself. He didn't kill only the rock star, he was killing off himself.

**EdB: From your writing on punk music from the later seventies, it becomes clear that rock music achieved a greater state of self-consciousness regarding its own history and conditions of production. Groups such as the Ramones and Devo,**

**for instance, used the ironical device of what you call “the representation of representation” by quoting musical stereotypes from the past and reinserting them in a new context. Has the pathetic gesture of Morrison not in a way cleared the way for this type of irony in rock music?**

DG: The Ramones and Devo were not reacting against Jim Morrison. They were reacting to the period of the autobiographical singer-songwriter like Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Jackson Browne—where you had a narcissistic, self-centered, self-indulgent, autobiographical, romantic figure without irony. And also, at the same time in the early 1970s you had the glam rock of David Bowie and Roxy Music which returned to the camp, homosexual, theatrical style, ironically quoting the fashion of thirties Art Deco. Both musical forms were very apolitical. James Taylor was a gentleman, an aristocratic poet, while punk was a return of the real urban situation in America. America was in recession; the great punk groups came from dying cities like Detroit (the MC5), or Cleveland (the Stooges). It was a politicized situation, and when it didn't work out it became anarchistic as opposed to the narcissistic, rich hippie. Punk in America was still part of pop art, but it was going back to the fifties in a very ironic way. The Ramones were quoting simple fifties rock with comic strips. And it was also concerned with anarchistic, nihilistic ideas of the city: “Beating on the brat with a baseball bat” (the Ramones). It was a parody of the exalted Jackson Browne kind of musician.

**Edb: You appear to associate the ironical use of quotation with a specifically American version of punk music.**

DG: Well, punk was American. When Malcolm McLaren came over to manage the New York Dolls, he brilliantly picked up the idea of American punk rock and turned it into a British model which was propagandistic, about changing society, and situationist. That was what he came out of. And he was using clothes, because that was the important thing in England; it was the use of fashion and clothes as a radical critique of society.

**Edb: How does fashion function as a radical critique of society?**

DG: It's like comic books; it's simply a kind of pop humor.

Dan Graham with The Static,  
Flyer, Riverside Studios,  
London, 1979.

**EdB: The statement behind Poly Styrene's song "Oh Bondage. Up Yours!" of 1977 appears to be: "I wear bondage not because I like it, but because I believe we're all repressed." [The reference is to Graham's essay "New Wave Rock and the Feminine" (1981).] This tactic could be considered "scandalous" because it inverts the repressive mechanism of the media. Her actual intentions, however, cannot be recognized by the media; they must necessarily be misunderstood. To complain about this misunderstanding is therefore beside the point.**

DG: But what you describe is a critique of the media. Malcolm McLaren was using the media's mechanism to show the media's contradiction. The repression is obviously coming from the media now. It is not coming from a fascist government but from a fascist media. Poly Styrene was a stand-up comedian. Punk was simply an improvised situation. I think everything in art and music is a kind of humorous take on what one's parents liked. It's about going back to one's own childhood and remembering the oppressive, embarrassing, and somewhat uncool music experiences and also the emotionality that was connected with it; finding inside that kind of music brilliant things where they did not exist before. That is what artists always do. My *Wild in the Streets: The Sixties* (1987) is going back to the grade-B teenage film for a mini rock opera.

**EdB: To conclude this interview, could you provide a brief description of your rock opera?**

DG: It was a project produced by both the Brussels opera and Chris Dercon. The idea was that architects, artists, and musicians had ten minutes to produce a small opera which would be broadcast live on television. My project took the form of the rock opera, which by that time had become very degraded. It began with The Who's *A Quick One* (1966) and got down to such terrible things as *Quadrophenia* (1974) and *Tommy* (1969). I chose one of my favorite teenage films, *Wild in the Streets* (1968), as the basis for my mini rock opera. It was a film about a twenty-three-year-old rock star who through devious means is elected president. He lowers the voting age to fourteen through a song called "14 or Fight" instead of

a song he was commissioned to do called “18 or Fight.” He changed the words and managed to put LSD into the water supply of the congress members. The voting age is lowered to fourteen and he becomes president. Everyone in the population over thirty is put into a concentration camp where they were given LSD. The White House is moved to the countryside. The irony of the story is very American and very much part of the hippie movement: don’t trust anybody over thirty.

Based on an interview carried out on February 23, 1997 in New York. An abridged version of this interview appeared in *Metropolis M*, no. 2 (April 1997).

**Marie-Paule Macdonald.**  
Scenography and pop-up designs,  
*Wild in the Streets*, 1987.